

T he Theory of Possessive Individualism



M. Kemal Utku*

Atılım Üniversitesi, Siyaset Bilimi ve Kamu Yönetimi Bölümü

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The Theory of Possessive Individualism written by the Canadian political philosopher C. B. Macpherson was published in 1962. This book proved to be very controversial and is still considered by many social scientists to be one of the 'must' books. In it Macpherson, who says that his life project was to expose liberal theory's link to capitalist market relations and to transcend it examines much of the Anglo-American liberal tradition that extended from Hobbes to the Levellers, to Harrinton and finally, to Locke. Actually he gives us a lecture on English political thought from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries based on his unique point of view.

* kutku@atilim.edu.tr

Macpherson believes that English political thought during this period had an underlying unity based on the assumption 'possessive individualism' and this constitutes the chief difficulty of the notion of individualism that underpins classical liberalism. This possessive character conceives of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them (Locke, 1977). Based on this conception "the human society is essentially a series of market relations; and political society becomes a means of safeguarding private property and the system of economic relations rooted in property" (Macpherson 1962, 1).

The author argues that these assumptions did actually correspond to the reality of seventeenth century market society and gave the liberal- democratic theory its strength. The trouble, according to Macpherson is that they have still been retained in modern liberal theory, even when they failed as foundations of liberal-democratic theory: "they have been kept even after they have ceased to correspond to our society" (1962, 3). The one change that has made it impossible to derive a valid theory of obligation from these assumptions, according to Macpherson, was the emergence of working-class articulacy. Man no longer saw themselves fundamentally equal in an inevitable subjection to the determination of the market. The inability to recognize the historical development of capitalist social relations created, an internal contradiction that had yet to be reconciled by liberals. Thus, liberalism would continue to be self-contradictory until it recognised its possessive *individualist* core: "The development of the market system, produced a class which could envisage alternatives to the system, thus destroyed the social fact (i.e. acceptance of the inevitability of market relations) which had fulfilled the first prerequisite of an autonomous theory of political obligation"(Storms 2004, 6).

Professor Macpherson's gigantic task naturally necessitated a response. He was criticized from both those on the left and the right. Liberals clearly rejected his thesis by claiming his uncovering of 'anomalies' was nothing more than a misinterpretation and misreading of the liberal canon by an outside quasi-Marxist (2004, 10). This liberal resistance lies, to Storms, in the author's main purpose: "to juxtapose a possessive *individualist* ethos or identity, inherent within the works of liberal thinkers, with liberalism's stated goals of individual freedom and equality... By linking them together, Macpherson was attempting to use liberalism against itself in order to break and ultimately transcend its link with capitalist market relations" (2004, 10). For many liberal thinkers, Macpherson was not even qualified to condemn a philosophical tradition, such as liberalism, that brought about universal suffrage, human rights and an end to slavery.

Marxist critics were also critical of Macpherson's attempt to reconcile liberalism's internal contradiction through a synthesis of liberalism's own ideas with a Marxist critique of the state and capitalist social relations. Thus many of these theorists believed that their model *alone* was sufficient to replace liberal and thus, Macpherson's **possessive individualist** model was seeking to supplant their *paradigm* as well. Some even accused him of having a watered down commitment to Marxism' (2004, 14).

In response Macpherson stated that the liberal-democratic state of our time lacks a firm theoretical basis. He believes that the difficulties of modern liberal-democratic theory lie deeper than had been thought. What he had always been trying to do, he says, is to work out a revision of liberal-democratic theory in the hope of making that theory more democratic while rescuing the valuable part of the liberal tradition which is submerged when liberalism is identified as synonymous with capitalist market relations.” This could be achieved,” he asserts, first, by forcing liberalism to come to terms with its own internal contradiction ; to use liberalism against itself in order to break and ultimately transcend its link with capitalist market relations” (Macpherson 1962, 4).

Reading this book has been very useful. As Storm (2004) explains, its main contribution is in its systematic study of liberalism. It has provided us political scientists, with a critical understanding of liberalism both at the domestic as well as the international level; helped us see clearly the way capitalist expansion and market ideology—both of which are an integral part of liberalism—helped fuel the eventual global dominance of European civilization: “When Macpherson is connected to the origins of (global) dominance, his work provides a model to understand the cultural ideology that provided both the impetus behind European hegemony and, the worldview that justified and legitimated European expansion and control. It aids us to see how liberalism, both in theory and in practice has become globally hegemonic” (2004, 34).

References

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